



United States Department of Agriculture

Draft Record of Decision Rio Grande National Forest Land Management Plan

Rocky Mountain Region

**Alamosa, Archuleta, Conejos, Hinsdale, Mineral,
Rio Grande, Saguache, and San Juan Counties, Colorado**



Rio Grande Pyramid in the Weminuche Wilderness



Forest Service

Rocky Mountain Region

August 2019

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Draft Record of Decision for the Rio Grande National Forest Land Management Plan

Rocky Mountain Region

**Alamosa, Archuleta, Conejos, Hinsdale, Mineral,
Rio Grande, Saguache, and San Juan Counties, Colorado**

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Introduction

This draft Record of Decision (ROD) documents my decision and rationale for approving the Rio Grande National Forest Land Management Plan (LMP). The decision implements the U.S. Forest Service's 2012 Land Management Planning Rule and fosters productive and sustainable use of our National Forest System lands and advances other strategic goals of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, including:

- Ensuring programs are delivered efficiently, effectively, and with integrity and a focus on customer service;
- Facilitating rural prosperity and economic development; and
- Providing all Americans access to a safe, nutritious, and secure food supply.

The Rio Grande National Forest (Forest) plays a unique role supporting communities in south-central Colorado, as well as throughout the southwestern United States. This LMP implements the U.S. Department of Agriculture strategy and was designed with the following three goals:

- Maintain or restore sustainable, resilient terrestrial ecosystems;
- Protect and restore watershed health, water resources, aquatic ecosystems, and the systems that rely on them;
- Actively contribute to social and economic sustainability in the broader landscape and connect citizens to the land.

The Rio Grande National Forest Land Management Plan improves customer service to the American people by simplifying management of the Forest. As a result of public input, we reduced the number of plan components and reduced the number of management areas. The public will benefit with a management plan that is easier to read and understand. The revised LMP is less prone to future conflict over different interpretations of language and overly complex management areas.

The Rio Grande National Forest contributes to rural prosperity, providing economic opportunities for timber harvesting, grazing operations, and diverse recreational pursuits. The LMP recognizes active forest management as a primary tool to improve forest health, reduce wildfire risk, and restore and maintain watersheds. It provides a platform to salvage dead trees in beetle-killed spruce-fir stands, but also establishes desired conditions that envision a future beyond the current forest health issues.

As the headwaters for the Rio Grande, water quality and aquatic health are persistent overarching concerns. The LMP incorporates new fire management approaches that will reduce the risk of uncharacteristic wildfire, thereby benefitting municipal water suppliers as well as downstream water users from Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas. Agricultural producers along the Rio Grande benefit from clean and abundant irrigation water that originates on the Forest.

Counties directly affected by this decision are Alamosa, Archuleta, Conejos, Hinsdale, Mineral, Rio Grande, Saguache, and San Juan.

Forest Setting

The Rio Grande National Forest is located in south-central Colorado and includes 1.83 million acres in the San Juan and Sangre de Cristo mountain ranges surrounding the San Luis Valley. Notably, the Forest contains the headwaters of the Rio Grande, which provides water from Colorado to New Mexico, Texas, and the Republic of Mexico. Our neighbors are the San Juan National Forest; the Gunnison National Forest; the Pike San Isabel National Forests; and Bureau of Land Management lands, which typically occupy lower elevations. Over half of the Forest is protected as designated wilderness or Colorado roadless. The Forest provides important connected habitats and ecosystems for fish and wildlife.

The Rio Grande National Forest plays a key role in supporting the economy of south-central Colorado. Populations in the eight-county area containing National Forest System lands are growing and are expected to continue to grow through 2030. Much of the area's income is linked to agriculture and other natural resources.

The Rio Grande National Forest supports from about 1,250 to 1,950 jobs in the area and contributes \$38 to \$64 million in labor income annually. The majority of these jobs are in recreation services, forest products, and livestock grazing industries. Timber sales and other wood products support from 142 to 855 jobs and provide from \$5.1 to \$30 million annually. Grazing operations on the Forest support an estimated 274 jobs and \$6.2 million annually. Livestock grazing has been an important part of the local economy and part of the cultural fabric of the San Luis Valley and the surrounding area for more than a century.

Timber resources from the Forest provide wood products to local mills and surrounding communities. Additionally, local residents rely on firewood for home heating.

Most timber sales come from the spruce-fir ecosystem, which has experienced a drastic changed condition due to the spruce bark beetle infestation that began in the early to mid-2000s. The West Fork Fire Complex in 2013 burned more than 100,000 acres. Many spruce-fir stands have experienced nearly 90 percent mortality. Timber industry partners continue to find markets for dead and dying spruce trees.

Mineral activity has played an important role in the area's history and early economic growth. The Forest provides a variety of mineral opportunities including locatable (silver or gold mining), salable (stone, gravel, and other materials available to the public with a permit), and leasable minerals (oil and gas); and recreational mineral collection through panning, dredging, sluice-box, and metal detectors. Most mineral operations on the Forest are done at a small scale.

More than half of the visitors to the Forest come from within 100 miles. The Forest provides outstanding campgrounds, motorized and nonmotorized trails, and other developed infrastructure. The Forest also provides many unique dispersed and backcountry recreational opportunities. Recreation activity supports about 550 jobs annually. Special use permits extend the recreation opportunities available and encourage commercial tourism activity on the Forest. Recreational special use permit holders on the Forest include Wolf Creek Ski Area and 32 outfitters and guides.

The San Luis Valley and surrounding San Juan and Sangre de Cristo Mountains are the ancestral homelands of several Native American clans, bands, and tribes. Several of these maintain strong cultural and spiritual connections to the area, including the Jicarilla Apache, Navajo Nation, Southern Ute, Ute Mountain Ute, and several Upper Rio Grande and Western Pueblo Tribes. Mount Blanca and Natural Arch have significant cultural and spiritual importance to several tribes.

Twenty-one percent, or 392,402 acres, of the Forest is designated wilderness, including the La Garita, Sangre de Cristo, South San Juan, and Weminuche Wilderness Areas. Additionally, 519,798 acres of the Forest are designated Colorado roadless under the 2012 Colorado Roadless Rule. Finally, there are about 118 miles of eligible and suitable wild, scenic, and recreational rivers and river segments, including 3.3 new miles recognized by this decision.

The Rio Grande National Forest provides habitat for many different species of wildlife, fish, and plants. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service identified 13 mammal, bird, insect, and fish species listed as threatened, endangered, proposed, or candidate species under the Endangered Species Act (USFWS 2018). There is no designated critical habitat in the planning area. Four of the 13 species listed are known to occur in the planning area; these include Canada lynx (threatened), Gunnison sage grouse (threatened), southwestern willow flycatcher (endangered), and Uncompahgre fritillary butterfly (threatened). Section 7 Consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service resulted in a Biological Opinion for the land management plan, dated March 15, 2019.

Need for Change

The existing land management plan, approved in November 1996, has been amended seven times. It is being revised now, in part, due to the changed conditions in the spruce-fir ecosystem associated with the spruce beetle infestation.

Since the early to mid-2000s, large spruce beetle outbreaks have occurred in Colorado, including on the Rio Grande National Forest. Aerial surveys conducted in 2016 indicated over 610,000 acres of tree mortality on the Forest. The spruce-fir forest mix ecosystem covers 54 percent of the Forest, and the bark beetle infestation has resulted in nearly 90 percent mortality in large portions of that ecosystem.

The needs for change, informed through public involvement, were summarized into four plan revision topics: special designations, fire management, management area complexity, and recommended wilderness. These revision topics were used to develop the draft LMP and alternatives to the proposed plan. Public comments on the draft plan and draft environmental impact statement were then used to further refine the preferred alternative. The Rio Grande National Forest Land Management Plan is a shared product resulting from significant public involvement throughout the plan revision process.

Engagement with State and Local Governments, other Federal Agencies, Tribes, and the Public

State and Local Governments and other Federal Agencies

Local communities depend on the economic, social, and ecological benefits provided by the Rio Grande National Forest. The Forest supports jobs and economies, local traditional ways of life, healthy wildlife populations, and clean air and water, among other benefits. Many of the issues and concerns facing the Forest require a cohesive and integrated management approach across the landscape. Representatives of counties and tribes, as well as State, and other Federal agencies, were important partners in revising the land management plan.

Ongoing collaboration with counties, state agencies, and tribes began with stakeholder interviews in October 2014 during the assessment phase of the planning process. During development of the LMP formal collaboration with Alamosa, Conejos, Hinsdale, Mineral, Rio Grande, and Saguache Counties, and the Colorado Department of Natural Resources significantly improved the quality of the plan. A Memorandum of Understanding formalized these relationships. Establishing these agreements helped build ongoing relationships and expectations to be applied during the planning process. As a result of this work, local counties support the balanced approach represented by the final LMP.

Tribes

Tribes have inhabited the area for thousands of years and provide important links between past uses and traditions to current management philosophy. Tribal input was solicited, provided, and considered throughout the revision process. The Forest initiated formal tribal consultation in October 2014 during the assessment phase. Existing tribal working groups were used for engagement during the plan revision process. The Navajo Nation joined the planning effort as a cooperating agency in February of 2016. Over the course of the revision process, the Forest has continued to update 19 interested tribes.

Five tribes elected to formally participate in the revision process: the Jicarilla Apache, Navajo Nation, Santa Ana Pueblo, Southern Ute Tribe, and Ute Mountain Ute Tribe. The tribes met with staff in 2015 to discuss *need for change* topics, important landscape features, and consideration of special areas of tribal interest. Tribes recognize the historical and spiritual importance of Mt. Blanca and Natural Arch areas, but were concerned about possible designations drawing unwanted attention from visitors, or possibly restricting motorized access for elders. The LMP provides plan components that ensure responsible management by protecting traditional cultural properties, providing access to exercise tribal treaty rights, protecting artifacts and remains, and allowing for continuation of traditional uses. However, it does not create a special designation for these areas.

Public Participation

More than one hundred individual public meetings were held to solicit input to support the plan revision. The Rio Grande National Forest began public participation during the

assessment phase of the planning process, starting in October 2014. Before beginning the assessment, Forest staff hosted many community awareness meetings and interviewed key stakeholders to gain understanding in how best to engage them throughout the process.

Specific topic-based meetings were held to inform the assessment process, including air, soil, and water; cultural and historic resources; ecosystem integrity drivers and stressors; fish, wildlife and rare plants; lands and infrastructure; minerals and energy; recreation and scenic resources; social, cultural, and economic resources; vegetation and fuels; and wilderness and special designated areas. These meetings were well-attended by more than 500 people. The Forest also used social media tools to pose and discuss assessment topics.

Following completion of the assessments, the Forest held meetings to gather input to develop the need for change. These meetings were held locally and through webinars for participants not able to attend in person. Concurrent with the planning process, the Forest hosted meetings specific to the wilderness evaluation process. A collaborative mapping tool was used to display the wilderness inventory and evaluation process to assist in gathering more focused and informed comments. Web-based tools greatly enhanced opportunities for anyone wanting to participate.

The notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement was published in the Federal Register on September 12, 2016. Local meetings were also held to discuss the proposed action. Many comments were received in response to the public scoping period. The notice of availability of the draft environmental impact statement and draft land management plan appeared in the Federal Register on September 29, 2017.

The comment period for the draft environmental impact statement and draft LMP ended on December 28, 2017. The 90-day comment period resulted in about 465 letters, including 204 unique letters and 222 form letters with identical content. Comments from letters were reorganized and aggregated into issue statements. Our responses to the comments are in appendix D of the final environmental impact statement, these include. 39 letters received after the close of the formal comment period. The public comments and the interdisciplinary team's responses were critical to improving the final environmental impact statement and the LMP.

Throughout the process, the Forest maintained a webpage dedicated to the LMP revision effort. The plan revision webpage provided up-to-date information throughout the assessment and planning process.

Decision and Rationale

Decision

I have reviewed the analysis disclosed in the final environmental impact statement, the planning record, comments from our State and local government partners, tribes, other Federal agencies, and the public and considered how the alternatives meet the identified *needs to change*, plan revision topics, and the requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule (36 CFR 219). Based on this review, I have selected alternative B modified as the Rio Grande

National Forest Land Management Plan. Alternative B modified is a logical outgrowth of the public process and reflects improvements that were suggested by the public.

The selected alternative combines aspects of alternative B and alternative C as analyzed in the final environmental impact statement. Portions of alternatives B and C are included in the selected alternative.

Changes between Draft and Final

The draft environmental impact statement and draft land management plan were released for public comment in September of 2017. There were 465 letters received during the comment period. In response to comment received, internal input, and new information, changes were made between release of the draft and final documents.

Some of these changes include adding bighorn sheep and two newly identified plant species to the species of conservation concern list; rewriting plan components to better align with definitions in the 2012 Planning Rule; adjusting the plan components for lynx in areas of high spruce mortality; and recognizing on-the-ground changes in the viability of standing dead spruce and adjusting the decadal timber outputs in the land management plan accordingly.

The decision to add bighorn sheep was a result of public comment and concern about persistence, including concerns from the State of Colorado. Two plant species (*Physaria scrotiformis* and *Cryptanthia cinerea* var. *pustulosa*) were also brought to our attention through updated survey data. After further consideration, they were also added to the list.

One of the most important changes between draft and final was the overall consolidation and reorganization of plan components. Many public comments indicated redundancy and overlapping purposes of plan components. Some commenters suggested plan components should be clarified, simplified, or eliminated. Other commenters suggested adding additional plan components for additional resource protection.

Some commenters suggested that draft plan components and management approaches did not meet the definitions provided in the 2012 Planning Rule. All plan components were reevaluated against definitions for standards, guidelines, objectives, desired conditions, and management approaches. In some cases they were reworded to better align with the definitions; in other cases they were moved to different sections, or combined with other similar plan components. In many cases they were removed because they were redundant, repeated existing law or policy, or were simply unnecessary to meet the purpose and need of the revision effort. In some cases we added new plan components based on public concerns. The expressed interest from the public was for an LMP that was understandable and easier to interpret, which is what guided this reorganization effort.

Nature of the Decision

The revised LMP will guide future projects, practices, and uses, to assure sustainable multiple-use management on the Rio Grande National Forest. The plan does not authorize projects or activities, commit the Forest Service to take action, nor dictate internal operations (such as personnel matters, law enforcement, budget, or organizational changes). The programmatic management direction in the LMP will be

implemented through the design and execution of site-specific activities, such as relocating a trail, conducting a prescribed burn, or harvesting timber. Decisions for these activities will be consistent with the land management plan and are typically subject to separate site-specific analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act.

The plan establishes components including desired conditions, objectives, standards, guidelines, and land suitability to ensure ecological integrity while providing the American people and rural communities with a range of social and economic benefits. The plan provides overall guidance for project- and activity-level decision-making and sets consistent expectations for the types of activities permissible on the Forest. Through the development of plan components and monitoring, we incorporated best available scientific information and created an adaptive management architecture that will allow us to better adapt to changing conditions.

Rationale for the Decision

The revised land management plan sets direction to maintain a healthy, accessible, and sustainable forest that integrates multiple uses; provides economic, ecological, and social opportunities; promotes education, environmental justice, cultural and environmental identity, and awareness for the conservation of its natural resources; and adaptive forest management that is inclusive and collaborative. The Rio Grande National Forest will implement the plan by designing and developing projects in cooperation with partners, and by using monitoring information and available scientific information.

I chose alternative B modified as the land management plan because it:

- Was developed and shaped by public comment throughout the revision process and represents a balanced management approach that provides for ecological integrity and sustainability, while providing economic opportunities important to rural communities;
- Improves public understanding and transparency by reducing management area complexity and consolidating plan components;
- Provides flexibility to respond to changing conditions. Climate change and other factors necessitate the need to be more nimble and adaptive. The use of management approaches provides guidance for future management, but does not replace traditional plan components for resource protection;
- Balances multiple-use values in the public interest. The plan addresses the need to accelerate active management and reduce hazardous fuels; maintain existing recreation areas and access opportunities; while also adding recommended wilderness; and eligible and suitable wild, scenic, and recreational rivers in areas with broad public support;
- Supports and sustains about 50 to 400 more full- and part-time jobs on an annual average basis. It supports about 1,250 to 1,950 full- or part-time jobs; \$38,297,000 to \$64,659,000 in labor income; and \$55,370,000 to \$93,602,000 in gross domestic products. The ranges of values reflect different potential timber harvest schedules over the next two decades;

- Plans for an accelerated salvage timber harvest to secure the value of dead spruce trees. The salvage timber harvest volume estimates transition over time from emphasizing salvage operations, to a more typical green timber program. This also reduces fuels on the landscape, thereby decreasing potential fire impacts on the landscape and to communities;
- Encourages the use of natural fire as a management tool by providing direction for unplanned ignitions and evaluating values at risk;
- Includes 40,052 acres in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains as recommended wilderness. Motorized access in the Sangre de Cristo range will not be impacted because the recommended wilderness boundaries were updated to exclude existing access points and corridors;
- Promotes greater partnerships and citizen science to assist in accomplishing more on-the-ground work and monitoring;
- Promotes improved public access through community connector trails, and maintains access and travel through the Forest. This decision is not a travel management decision, but will be compatible with future travel management decisions;
- Updates management direction for wildlife and aquatic species including species listed under the Endangered Species Act and the identified species of conservation concern;
- Provides management direction for ecosystem services such as clean water; clean air; cultural values; spiritual values, and solitude; hunting, fishing, and wildlife viewing; production of wood products and availability of forest products, such as *Ligusticum porteri*, firewood, and boughs; and research and education;
- Identifies eligible and suitable wild, scenic, and recreational river miles, and adds 3.3 additional miles in this category.

Alternative B modified best addresses the needs for change, the purpose and need to revise the plan, and the four primary plan revision topics. It is not a substantial departure from the draft version of the LMP, but rather a modified version of existing action alternatives falling within the bounds of analysis in the draft environmental impact statement. Alternative B modified has support from surrounding communities and tribal partners while meeting requirements of social, economic, and ecologically sustainable forest management practices.

Requirements of the Planning Rule

The land management plan has been prepared in compliance with the Forest Service's 2012 Land Management Planning Rule at 36 CFR Part 219. The LMP meets the specific Rule requirements at sections 219.8 through 219.12 as follows.

219.8 Sustainability

I have reviewed and determined that the LMP provides plan components and management area direction for social, economic, and ecological sustainability within the inherent capability of the Rio Grande National Forest.

The LMP provides ecological sustainability by addressing ecosystem integrity; air, soil, and water; riparian areas; and best management practices for water quality as follows:

Ecosystem Integrity

- The LMP identifies two plan goals that provide ecological integrity: maintain and restore sustainable, resilient terrestrial ecosystems; and protect and restore watershed health, water resources, aquatic ecosystems, and the systems that rely on them.
- Noxious weeds and invasive species are addressed through management approaches, desired conditions, and objectives.
- Groundwater dependent ecosystems and riparian management zones are protected and restored through management approaches, desired conditions, objectives, standards, and guidelines.
- Other sections, such as wildlife, vegetation, range, and watershed, include many plan components that restore or maintain structure, composition, function, and connectivity of ecosystems. For example, the LMP includes a guideline to retain snag density that will contribute to the diversity of forest structure and maintenance of important habitats (G-VEG-1); a guideline to prioritize the retention of old, late-successional forests (G-VEG-3); and a desired condition table that sets goals for all forest development stages for terrestrial ecosystems (DC-VEG-3).

Air, Soil, and Water

- Air quality is addressed through a desired condition and guideline that addresses Class I and Class II wilderness areas, as well as dust abatement and particulate matter that compromise air quality and water quality.
- Soil resources are protected through management approaches, as well as a desired condition, standard, and guideline. The standard sets limits on detrimental soil conditions from management activities, which can often be mitigated during the activity and successfully rehabilitated after an activity.
- Water resources are protected through a variety of plan components that protect watersheds, groundwater dependent ecosystems, and riparian management zones. The Rio Grande National Forest enjoys a stable relationship with water users through prior decrees and settlements.
- Identification of priority watersheds is done to focus effort on the integrated restoration of watershed conditions in these areas. Three priority watersheds have been identified – Archuleta Creek, Headwaters Rio Chama, and Middle Fork Carnero Creek.

Riparian Areas

- Riparian management zones are addressed as important ecological features for the Forest and are protected by desired conditions, standards, and guidelines. An objective sets a trajectory to restore impacted riparian and wetland areas over the next 15 years. Riparian areas also benefit from the integrated nature of the plan, which identifies other plan components that indirectly protect riparian areas.

Best Management Practices for Water Quality

- The Rio Grande National Forest follows regional and national policy that typically sets best management practices to protect water quality. In addition, the LMP provides Forestwide plan components for riparian areas, groundwater protection, and soil protection to enhance regional and national guidance.

The LMP contributes to social and economic sustainability by addressing social, cultural, and economic conditions; sustainable recreation; multiple uses that contribute to local, regional, and the national economy; ecosystem services; cultural and historic uses; and opportunities to connect people to nature as follows:

Social, Cultural, and Economic Conditions

- The LMP sets an overarching plan goal to actively contribute to social and economic sustainability in the broader landscape and connect citizens to the land. Plan components under this goal address scenery, recreation, congressionally designated trails, and cultural resources.
- The LMP promotes opportunities provided by timber harvesting, continued grazing operations for sheep and cattle, mineral activity, and diverse recreational pursuits that support local outfitters, guides, and retail establishments.
- Water originating on the Rio Grande National Forest is a significant economic driver in terms of municipal uses, fishing and rafting opportunities, and agricultural uses. Clean water from the Forest benefits 152 downstream counties. The LMP better protects water resources from threats of uncharacteristic wildfire and other potential sources of impairment.
- Social sustainability is addressed through management areas, desired conditions, standards, and guidelines that recognize areas of tribal importance and cultural resources. It is also provided for through economic opportunities described above.

Sustainable Recreation

- Sustainable recreation is an important component of the economics in local counties, some of which are composed of 95 percent National Forest System lands. The area is reliant on tourism and recreation activities including but not limited to backpacking, fishing, hiking, hunting, rafting, mountain biking, and motorized recreation.
- Management approaches for recreation recognize the importance of partnerships with motorized as well as nonmotorized recreational user groups. Land management plan objectives will help the Forest develop trail connections between the Forest and local communities.
- Recreation standards and guidelines protect resources from damage by limiting the number of days for campsites, or by potentially closing areas when use conflicts or safety substantially disrupt the public's outdoor experiences.

Multiple Uses that Contribute to Local, Regional, and the National Economy

- The LMP provides for multiple uses, including timber, grazing, recreation, mineral opportunities, hunting, fishing, and wildlife viewing. Economic contributions were

estimated for timber, grazing, and recreation in the final environmental impact statement. The plan is estimated to support or sustain 50 to 400 additional full- and part-time jobs annually.

- The LMP supports from about 1,250 to 1,950 jobs and about \$38 to \$64 million in total forest management-related income for local communities annually, including work with partners and other agencies.

Ecosystem Services

- During the assessment phase, Rio Grande National Forest staff identified and documented key provisioning, cultural, regulating, and supporting services provided by the lands we manage. Provisioning services are products derived from forest lands and include forage for grazing, timber, water, fish and wildlife, and other non-timber products. Cultural services relate to nonmaterial benefits people obtain from ecosystems through spiritual enrichment, cognitive development, reflection, recreation, and aesthetic experiences. Regulating services are benefits provided by ecosystem processes that moderate natural phenomena, such as floods and drought. Supporting services are the underlying natural processes that sustain ecosystems and enable the production of other ecosystem services, such as soil formation, nutrient cycling, and water filtration.
- The LMP continues to provide local subsistence needs from provisioning services, such as firewood. Firewood collection and utilization is widely used for home heating throughout the local community.
- The LMP provides protection for the continued provision of ecosystem services. Plan components are not specific to “ecosystem services,” but address service endpoints of soil and water protection; species diversity and habitat maintenance; cultural resources and areas of tribal importance; and recreation, scenery, and viewshed. Large protected areas on the Forest, including designated wilderness and roadless areas, comprise more than half the total land area. By designation, activities that could compromise some ecosystem services are either prohibited or strictly limited.
- Carbon sequestration was specifically assessed prior to plan revision. The Rio Grande National Forest contains about 75 teragrams of total forest ecosystem carbon. This has increased slightly over the duration of the forest inventory and analysis sampled from 1990 to 2012. Forest health, fire, and forest management practices may change the amount and trend of sequestered carbon. Maximizing carbon sequestration in the Forest was not a goal, nor part of the purpose and need for the LMP, so it was not a decision factor when choosing among alternatives.

Cultural and Historic Uses and Areas of Tribal Importance

- The LMP protects cultural and historic uses by providing many management approaches to protect sites from management activities and engage partners in restoration of sites where appropriate. Standards and guidelines also ensure that cultural artifacts will be preserved in place, or curated when necessary.

- Multiple management approaches, desired conditions, and guidelines are in place to protect the ancestral homelands of several Native American clans, bands, and tribes. Tribes maintain strong cultural and spiritual connections to the areas.
- Future projects that have the potential to affect historic resources will comply with the National Historic Preservation Act.

Opportunities to Connect People to Nature

- The Forest staff continues to work to connect citizens to the land. The LMP direction emphasizes the creation of loop trails as well as connecting to community trails where possible.
- Citizen monitoring and volunteer efforts are offered and will continue in the future. The monitoring plan encourages citizen science and having private citizens participate in managing federal resources.

219.9 Diversity of Plant and Animal Communities

I have reviewed and determined that the LMP provides plan components and management area direction to provide for a diversity of plant and animal communities within the authority of the Forest Service and within the inherent capability of the Rio Grande National Forest.

The LMP provides plan components to protect and maintain ecosystem composition, structure, function, and connectivity, and species-specific direction—where needed—to maintain ecological conditions and viable populations within the plan area. I have also reviewed the effects disclosed in the final environmental impact statement.

The ecological sustainability analysis process used in developing the land management plan followed the requirements of 36 CFR 219.8 and 219.9, along with the Forest Service Handbook. This process addressed at-risk species via ecosystem sustainability and integrity, and the inherent capability of the planning area.

The LMP uses a complementary ecosystem and species-specific approach (also called coarse-filter/fine-filter approach) for at-risk terrestrial and aquatic species. Species groups, ecosystems, and watersheds were also considered in the planning process (including in the development of land management plan alternatives, management approaches, as well as in the monitoring program). Effects to at-risk species, including threatened and endangered species and species of conservation concern, are disclosed in the *Wildlife and Plant Species* section of the final environmental impact statement. These, and other sections in the environmental impact statement, describe the ecological conditions, key ecosystem characteristics, and land management plan components that will maintain at-risk species.

The LMP contributes to ecosystem integrity and diversity by providing ecosystem and species-specific plan components as follows:

Ecosystem Integrity and Diversity

- The LMP provides for ecosystem integrity and diversity through management approaches, desired conditions, standards, and guidelines, as analyzed in the final environmental impact statement.
- Habitat connectivity was identified early in the assessment process as a key ecosystem characteristic and carried forward as a need for change, then incorporated into Goal 1. The LMP provides Forestwide plan components that address habitat connectivity instead of designated special interest areas that would result in increased management complexity. Avoiding overly complex management was a concern raised throughout the public process. Plan components that address habitat connectivity include a guideline to prohibit new roads and other infrastructure in the riparian management zone (G-RMZ-1); an objective to remove existing aquatic barriers that will improve connectivity (OBJ-FISH-1); and a desired condition for habitat conditions to promote connectivity to facilitate species movement within and between daily home ranges, seasonal movement, genetic interchange and long distance movement (DC-WLDF-3).
- In addition, habitat connectivity and wildlife corridors are maintained through designated wilderness areas, which cover about 392,000 acres, and Colorado roadless areas, which cover an additional 519,798 acres. These protected areas are well-distributed across the Forest and often connect to adjacent protected areas on neighboring lands. The Colorado Roadless Rule, promulgated in 2012, significantly enhanced connectivity and wildlife corridors as many Colorado roadless areas abut designated wilderness areas. The final environmental impact statement for the Colorado Roadless Rule contemplated the benefits of habitat connectivity with the additional protections offered by upper tier and non-upper tier designations. Management practices are a tool that can be used to maintain and restore terrestrial ecosystems and provide for connectivity of habitat across the landscape. Given that, I feel that additional special designations or special interest areas for the LMP are not needed and could limit future management in those areas, including opportunities for landscape-scale restoration.
- Habitat connectivity is also enhanced by designations of wild and scenic river miles on the Forest. The LMP identifies three additional miles for designation that enhance protections for valuable riparian areas that often serve as important corridors and refugia for wildlife. Connectivity of these habitats is an important component of ecological integrity and makes ecosystems more resilient to disturbances and stressors, such as climate change.

The LMP provides additional, species-specific plan components for federally listed species and species of conservation concern as follows:

Federally Listed Species

- The official list of federally listed species from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is included in the project record and contains thirteen species of mammals, birds, and fishes. Effects to federally threatened and endangered species are disclosed in detail

in the biological assessment (USDA Forest Service 2018) and further reviewed in the Biological Opinion (USFWS 2019).

- The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service provided conclusions on impacts from the LMP on recovery of Canada lynx. The land management plan contains direction that is designed to contribute to the long-term recovery of federally threatened and endangered species on the Forest and any designated habitat.
- Projects and activities conducted during implementation of the land management plan may affect federally listed species. Plan components were designed to contribute to the recovery of populations of federally listed species. Projects initiated after completion of the land management plan will implement reasonable and prudent measures, and terms and conditions included in the programmatic biological opinion and land management plan, unless modified by future consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Species of Conservation Concern

- Fifty-two species of conservation concern were identified on the Rio Grande National Forest. The list includes plant and animal species that are known to occur in the plan area and for which there are substantial concerns for the persistence of the species.
- Several data sources, including NatureServe, and the Colorado Natural Heritage Program, provide the best available scientific information to identify species and associated ecological conditions.
- Most habitat needs of species of conservation concern are met by plan components at the coarse-filter level. Some species have fine-filter plan components to address species-specific needs where the coarse filter was inadequate or indeterminate (Appendix D of the land management plan, Table 23).
- Based on public comment, three species were added after release of the draft LMP: bighorn sheep, *Physaria scrotiformis* (West Silver Bladerpod) and *Cryptantha cinerea* var. *pustulosa* (James' cryptantha).

219.10 Multiple Uses

I have reviewed and determined that the LMP provides plan components and management area direction for ecosystem services and multiple uses, including outdoor recreation, range, timber, watershed, wildlife, and fish, within the inherent capability of the Rio Grande National Forest.

The LMP contributes to multiple uses by addressing multiple use, sustainable recreation, and protection for specially designated areas as follows:

Integrated Resource Management for Multiple Uses

- The LMP provides future opportunities for timber operations to achieve multiple benefits for wildlife, fuels reduction, and watershed protection. Future work may include landscape-scale restoration, which often integrates many different program goals and objectives into one project.

- The LMP contains integrated Forestwide plan components that are applicable regardless of project type or purpose and need. For example, the vegetation section contains a guideline for snag retention that also serves as a coarse filter plan component for many species of conservation concern. Following the snag guideline for a vegetation management project will also benefit several species of conservation concern.

Plan Components for Sustainable Recreation, Protection of Cultural and Historic Resources, Areas of Tribal Importance, Wilderness Areas, Wild and Scenic Rivers, and Designated Areas

- The LMP contains plan components that specifically address recreation sustainability, areas of tribal importance, protection of cultural and historic resources, as well as wilderness areas, wild and scenic rivers, and special interest areas.

219.11 Timber Requirements based on the National Forest Management Act

I have reviewed and determined that the LMP provides plan components and management area direction for timber management within the inherent capability of the Rio Grande National Forest.

The LMP addresses timber management requirements by identifying land suitability and limits for timber production and harvest as follows:

Identification of Lands Suited and Not Suited for Timber Production and the Sustained Yield Limit

- Lands that may be suitable for timber production are those that are legally available and technologically feasible for harvest (forest land with no potential for irreversible soil or watershed damage and where regeneration can be ensured). The timber suitability analysis identified 499,936 acres on the Forest that may be suitable for timber production.
- The final area suitable for timber production is a subset of this and totals 471,900 acres. At this stage, acres were removed based on management area compatibility and the desired conditions of those management areas.
- The LMP identifies the maximum quantity of timber that may be removed from the plan area (36 CFR 219.7 and 219.11 (d)(6)). Forest Service Handbook direction at 1909.12, Chapter 60, defines the sustained yield limit as the volume of timber that could be produced in perpetuity on lands that may be suitable for timber production. The calculation of the sustained yield is not limited by land management plan desired conditions, other plan components, or the unit's fiscal and organizational capability. The sustained yield limit was determined to be 73,749 CCF (hundred cubic feet) per year.

Timber Harvest for Purposes Other Than Timber Production

- The LMP allows timber harvest for purposes other than timber production. Trees can be cut for other purposes than a traditional timber sale. Forest management often

accomplishes multiple objectives, such as fuel reduction and wildlife habitat improvement.

Guidance for and Limits on Timber Harvest

- Guidance and limits on timber harvest are provided through management approaches, standards, guidelines, and other plan components in the LMP and follow the direction in Forest Service Handbook 1909.12, Chapter 60.

219.12 Monitoring

I have reviewed and determined that the LMP provides plan monitoring to inform the progress of meeting plan goals, objectives, and desired conditions. The monitoring plan addresses the eight requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule in the form of questions, indicators, data sources, collection frequency, and associated plan components that are all included in Chapter 4 of the LMP.

The LMP addresses plan monitoring as follows:

- Involving stakeholders and the general public in plan monitoring, including an annual stakeholder meeting with the Forest Supervisor. The meeting will discuss land management plan implementation and monitoring results, with an open public dialogue on what is working and what may require changes. This commitment to maintaining relationships will also assist responsiveness and plan updates.
- Developing a core group of questions and indicators. Many of these come from existing monitoring programs from other partners or agencies, such as Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Forest Inventory and Analysis, the Colorado Natural Heritage Program, Natural Resource Conservation Service, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies, Colorado Division of Water Resources, and other groups.
- Incorporating monitoring data from other agencies and partners will help ensure that we are designing a program that is more independent and objective than solely relying on Rio Grande National Forest staff that often have other program priority work.
- The LMP monitoring program was designed to be cost effective and can be implemented during rising and falling budget cycles.

Aspects of Decision

Preliminary Administrative Recommendations

Recommended Wilderness

This recommendation is a preliminary administrative recommendation that will receive further review and possible modification by the Chief of the Forest Service, the Secretary of Agriculture, and the President of the United States. The Congress has reserved the authority to make final decisions on wilderness designation. Plan implementation is not dependent upon subsequent action-related recommendations for wilderness designation.

The 2012 Land Management Planning Rule directs the responsible official to “inventory and evaluate lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System.” (36 CFR 219.7(2)(v)) There is no obligation to recommend acres for wilderness to Congress. The information considered in making this preliminary administrative recommendation for each area recommended for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System is available in appendix A of the final environmental impact statement. The inventory, evaluation, and recommendation process followed direction in Chapter 70 of Forest Service Handbook 1909.12.

I am recommending 40,052 acres of the Forest for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. I understand the concerns from all sides of the issue, from those requesting additional acres to those wanting a zero net increase in wilderness acres. On the basis of evaluation and public comment, I believe the acres being recommended represent high-quality acres that are capable of maintaining the unique social and ecological characteristics that make them eligible for wilderness designation while minimizing the effects to those concerned with the inherent tradeoffs that come with managing these areas to maintain their wilderness characteristics.

The areas being recommended for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System are in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains adjacent to the boundary of the designated Sangre de Cristo Wilderness. The recommended areas are in Saguache and Alamosa Counties, Colorado. Many letters of support were received during public comment, including a letter from the Saguache County Commissioners.

The land management plan includes management direction to maintain and protect the social and ecological characteristics that provide the basis for each area’s suitability for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. Management area direction in recommended wilderness includes “Mechanized transport and motorized use are not suitable...” The suitability determination for mechanized transport will protect and maintain the ecological and social characteristics that provide the basis for wilderness recommendation. Including this direction is an appropriate step to ensuring protection and maintenance in these areas. This decision does not designate any new wilderness areas.

There are currently limited nonconforming, mechanized, and motored uses, which will be excluded within the recommended wilderness boundaries. Recommended wilderness boundaries were adjusted to exclude existing roads and current access points will provide access to the recommended wilderness areas.

The overall wilderness inventory process considered an estimated 1,344,000 acres. Alternatives B and D, analyzed in the environmental impact statement, recommended 58,669 acres and 284,853 acres, respectively. Of the 40,052 acres recommended for wilderness in the selected alternative B modified, 12,099 acres are in Colorado Roadless Areas.

Wild, Scenic, and Recreational Rivers

This recommendation is a preliminary administrative recommendation that will receive further review and possible modification by the Chief of the Forest Service, Secretary of Agriculture, or the President of the United States. Congress has reserved the authority to

make final decisions on designation of rivers as part of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (PL 90-542), created by Congress in 1968, was developed to preserve rivers with outstanding natural, cultural, and recreational values in a free-flowing condition for the enjoyment of present and future generation. This Act was amended in 1975 (PL 93-621). The 1996 forest plan identified about 125 miles of rivers as eligible or suitable for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. As a result of the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve Act of 2000, 7 miles of eligible river segments were transferred to the National Park Service, leaving 118 miles of eligible and suitable wild, scenic, and recreational river on the Forest.

Selected river segments are preserved for possessing outstandingly remarkable values, which include scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural, and other similar values. Designated rivers or river segments are preserved in their free-flowing condition and are not dammed or otherwise impeded. Designation as a wild, scenic, or recreational river does not confer the same type of protection as a wilderness area designation. However, wild, scenic, and recreational designation protects the water quality and free-flowing nature of rivers in non-federal areas, something the Wilderness Act and other federal designations cannot do.

Eligible wild, scenic, and recreational rivers, or river segments, are assigned one or more preliminary classifications: wild, scenic, or recreational. Preliminary classifications are based on the developmental character of the river on the date of designation and dictate the level of interim protection measures to apply. The most remote and undeveloped classification is wild. Rivers classified as scenic are free of impoundments, with shorelines or watersheds still largely primitive and shorelines largely undeveloped, but accessible in places by roads. Rivers classified as recreational may have many access points and nearby bridges, railroads, and roads. Recreational rivers also may have some impoundment or diversion in place. The classification of a river is not necessarily related to the outstandingly remarkable value.

The 1975 amendment to the Act required that three tributary forks of the Conejos River, as well as the main stem of the Conejos to where it crossed Highway 17, and excluding Platoro Reservoir, be studied for potential inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. In 1979, El Rito Azul, the North, Middle, and South Fork of the Conejos; as well as the main stem of the Conejos from Three Forks to Platoro Reservoir were recommended as wild rivers to the Secretary of Agriculture. In addition, the main stem of the Conejos from the town of Platoro to the confluence with South Fork of the Conejos was recommended as a recreational river segment. To date no legislative action has been taken.

As a result of this analysis, a 3.3-mile river segment has been found to have outstandingly remarkable features and has been determined to be eligible for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System (36 CFR 219.7 (2)(v) and (vi)). This new river segment is in addition to the 118 miles of rivers that were determined to be eligible or suitable for inclusion from the 1996 forest plan. This segment is a portion of Deadman Creek and is located on lands that were obtained as part of the Baca Mountain Tract.

The river or segment, length, outstandingly remarkable values, and preliminary designation are shown in Appendix B of the land management plan.

Alternatives Considered

Alternatives Analyzed in Detail

Five alternatives, including a no-action alternative, were considered toward this draft decision. Five alternatives were considered in detail in the final environmental impact statement, while one alternative submitted during public comment on the draft environmental impact statement was reviewed and not analyzed as presented. This is discussed below.

While all of the alternatives considered adhere to the principles of multiple use and the sustained yield of goods and services required by the Code of Federal Regulations (36 CFR §219.1 (b)), the type and quantity of uses and goods and services vary across the alternatives. Forestwide and management area direction identified in the land management plan generally applied to all action alternatives, unless otherwise noted in the environmental impact statement. Direction which amends and modifies the direction in the Southern Rockies Lynx Amendment is included in the land management plan. This direction was included in alternatives B and D in the draft environmental impact statement, and in alternative B modified. The direction was updated between issuing the draft and final documents and applies to this decision.

Alternative A: No Action (1996 Forest Plan)

Alternative A, the no-action alternative, reflects the 1996 forest plan as amended, and accounts for current laws and regulations. The no-action alternative retains the 1996 management direction, as amended, including management area prescriptions. This alternative serves as a baseline for comparison with the action alternatives.

Alternative B

Alternative B is the 1996 forest plan slightly updated and modified to meet direction of the 2012 Land Management Planning Rule. This alternative was presented as the proposed action in the draft environmental impact statement. It considered 58,669 acres of recommended wilderness and proposed creation of four geographic areas based on land designations including wilderness, Colorado roadless, special interest areas, and general forest. This alternative and all action alternatives included the proposed addition of Deadman Creek to the eligible and suitable National Wild and Scenic Rivers System and implementation of two wildland fire management zones. Management areas were adjusted and direction included that describes the ongoing uses and management.

Alternative B modified

Alternative B modified was developed after public comment was received on the draft plan and draft environmental impact statement. Adding this new alternative was a logical outgrowth of the public process and reflects improvements that were suggested by the

public, including the need to simplify management by reducing the number of management areas and geographic areas; reducing the number and complexity of plan components; and incorporating timber projections that better reflect the salvage situation over the next few years. Alternative B modified incorporated aspects of alternative B and alternative C and falls within the bounds of analysis for those two alternatives. Additional information was analyzed specifically for alternative B modified, where appropriate, in the final environmental impact statement.

Alternative C

Alternative C proposed the largest adjustment to management area boundaries. Management areas were consolidated to reduce confusion and add management flexibility. No additional acres of recommended wilderness were included. This alternative was designed to maximize multiple use across the planning area.

Alternative D

Alternative D proposed the greatest amount of recommended wilderness and additional special interest areas. As such, this alternative reduced the amount of motorized recreation available, emphasized protected areas, and reduced the amount of acres available for timber production.

The final environmental impact statement considered five alternatives; no preferred alternative was identified in the draft. Alternative B modified (decision) was developed following public involvement. The alternatives that were considered are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of alternatives considered in the final environmental impact statement

[Reported in acres]

	Alternative A: No Action	Alternative B: Proposed Action	Alternative B modified	Alternative C	Alternative D
Suitable Timber	320,600	468,300	471,900	480,700	401,400
Annual CCF/MBF including salvage (1 st decade)	32,800/16,266	32,800/16,266	Years 1-3: 62,800/31,400 Years 4-5: 28,000/12,464 Years 6-10: 12,000/3,696	Years 1-6: 62,800/31,400 Years 7-10: 22,200/4,620	17,800/8,804
Annual CCF/MBF including salvage (2nd decade)	8,400/2,587	8,400/2,587	12,000/3,696	22,200/4,620	4,000/1,232
Grazing (animal months)	143,077	143,077	143,077	143,077	143,077
Special Interest Areas (acres)	58,534	50,834	50,834	50,834	50,834
Recommended Wilderness (acres)	0	58,669	40,052	0	284,853

	Alternative A: No Action	Alternative B: Proposed Action	Alternative B modified	Alternative C	Alternative D
Management Areas/Geographic Areas	17/0	14/4	9/0	8/0	16/4

Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Study

The National Environmental Policy Act requires Federal agencies to rigorously explore and objectively evaluate all reasonable alternatives and to briefly discuss the reasons for eliminating any alternatives that were not developed in detail (40 CFR 1502.14). Public comments received in response to the proposed action provided suggestions for alternative methods of achieving the purpose and need. Some of these may have been outside the scope of what can be included in the revised Rio Grande Land Management Plan, duplicative of the alternatives considered in detail, or determined to be components that would cause unnecessary environmental harm. One alternative was considered, but dismissed from detailed consideration for reasons summarized below.

- The alternative proposed sage-grouse protection areas. The Forest does not have an appreciable amount of habitat for the Gunnison sage-grouse. Management direction for sage-grouse is included in all action alternatives.
- The Wolf Creek lynx linkage area was proposed to become a lynx special interest area. Linkage areas and associated direction are adequately identified in the Southern Rockies Lynx Amendment, which is incorporated into land management plan direction. Additional plan components were added to provide lynx protections in the LMP.
- Plan components associated with focal wetland complexes were presented in the alternative. The LMP direction protects aquatic resources, including fens and wetlands, by reducing impacts through plan components. Existing policy through the Forest Service Manual and Handbooks also provides additional direction to meet this purpose.
- The alternative also included elimination of grazing in existing and proposed research natural areas. In general, grazing is not authorized in research natural areas, with one exception. The Hot Creek Research Natural Area is part of the Hot Creek Allotment, which is grazed under a valid permit. The alternative suggested that protected areas, big game winter range, calving and fawning grounds, bighorn sheep areas, wetlands, riparian areas, campgrounds, and other areas be determined as unsuitable for renewable energy development.

I decided not to bring this alternative forward for detailed review because it did not adequately address the needs for change, the plan revision topics, and the purpose and need for action. Therefore, the benefit of conducting detailed analysis on this proposal did not justify the costs to do so. However, similar aspects of this proposed alternative have been incorporated into the LMP, and other features were analyzed in the final environmental impact statement. This is consistent with the Council on Environmental

Quality regulations to briefly discuss reasons for eliminating alternatives from detailed study.

Environmentally Preferable Alternative

The environmentally preferable alternative is that which causes the least harm to the biological and physical environment and best protects and preserves historic, cultural, and natural resources. Alternative B modified is the environmentally preferred alternative. When compared to the other alternatives it best contributes to ecological, social, and economic sustainability. Alternative B modified helps advance desired conditions for the Rio Grande National Forest by establishing strategic fire management zones, by focusing on forest health conditions, by providing for at-risk species through the coarse-filter/fine-filter approach, by continuing to provide and promote socioeconomic development to rural counties, by maintaining cultural and historic uses of the national forest, and by providing for future outdoor recreational activities and uses by diverse populations.

Best Available Scientific Information

The 2012 Planning Rule (§219.6(a)(3) and 219.14(a)(4)) requires the responsible official to document how the best available scientific information was used to inform the assessment, the plan decision, and the monitoring program. Such documentation must identify what information was determined to be the best available scientific information, explain the basis for that determination, and explain how the information was applied to the issues considered. The land management plan, plan components, monitoring program, and plan recommendations were developed and informed by the best available scientific information.

An interdisciplinary team of resource specialists from the Forest Service, academia, and other agencies (state, Federal) compiled and evaluated information for the assessments and the best available scientific information. A smaller interdisciplinary team used the assessments that had been prepared and updated the best available scientific information to develop the proposed action (September 2016), the alternatives to the proposed action, and the analysis and comparison of alternatives in the environmental impact statement (draft September 2017). The information includes material readily available from public sources (libraries, research institutions, scientific journals, and online literature). It also includes information obtained from other sources, such as participation and attendance at scientific conferences, scientific knowledge from local experts, findings from ongoing research projects, workshops, and collaborations, professional knowledge and experience, and information received during public participation periods. The interdisciplinary team used and updated a geographic information system database to evaluate complex spatial effects resulting from implementation of the alternatives (such as recreation opportunity spectrum and effects to wildlife habitat by species). The sustained yield limit was calculated using yield information from the Forest Vegetation Simulator, the Forest Service' national forest growth simulation model.

The Forest worked with the Forest Service Rocky Mountain Research Station to conduct a climate seminar with employees. Resource-specific reports and bibliographies produced from the seminar discussions were used in the analysis.

Resource specialists consider what is most accurate, reliable, and relevant in their use of the best available scientific information. The best available scientific information includes the publications listed in the *Referenced Cited* sections of the assessments, environmental impact statement, and land management plan. It also includes additional information used, updated, or included in the project record for the assessments, environmental impact statement, and land management plan. The final environmental impact statement provided documentation of how the best available scientific information was used to inform planning, the plan components, and other plan content, including the land management plan monitoring program (36 CFR 219.3). The *References Cited* sections of the final environmental impact statement and land management plan may include science that is discussed to address opposing science, as required by the National Environmental Policy Act.

Cooperation between county, State, and Federal agencies and tribes also contributed to the best available scientific information. The Forest coordinated with other national forest and regional specialists, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, the Colorado Natural Heritage Program, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on lists of species known to occur on National Forest System lands managed by the Forest, species habitat associations, and the development of the land management plan and alternatives. Other plans considered during the development of the land management plan include Colorado's State Wildlife Action Plan (2015).

Unpublished information from many years of monitoring were reviewed, as was information provided by other groups such as the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory.

Much of the recreation and roads information and plan direction is derived from the Forest Service infrastructure database (INFRA) and from National Visitor Use Monitoring data. The infrastructure database is a collection of web-based data entry forms, and reporting and mapping tools that allow national forests to manage and report the best available information about the inventory of constructed features, including roads and trails. National Visitor Use Monitoring is a National Forest System-wide monitoring survey that collects forest-specific recreation use surveys every five years.

The preliminary results of an ongoing study on lynx habitat usage were received following release of the draft environmental impact statement and land management plan. The results of the study were used to update the VEG S7 standard in the land management plan to better reflect how Canada lynx are using the dead spruce-fir ecosystem. Habitat relationships of Canada lynx in spruce bark beetle-impacted Forests were posted to the land management plan revision webpage for review.

Based on my review of the final environmental impact statement, the information presented above, and the planning record, I find that the most accurate and reliable scientific information available that is relevant to the issues considered in this land management plan has been used to inform the planning process and has been applied to the issue considered in the revision, as required by 36 CFR 219.3.

Findings Required by Other Decisions

Federal Reserved Water Rights in Water Division No. 3

In 1979, pursuant to the McCarran Amendment, the United States made an application for reserved rights on lands administered by the Rio Grande National Forest (Case No. 79-CW-85). The 1996 forest plan acknowledged the ongoing work in the case, and contained a guideline directing the Rio Grande National Forest to obtain instream flow water rights to protect stream processes, aquatic and riparian habitats, and recreation and aesthetic uses on streams where such values are important. Through a series of amended applications, uses such as stock water from springs and campground wells were granted appropriative rights, and the quantity of the reserved rights were determined. In 2000 a decree was issued in Water Division No. 3 whereby the United States and more than 30 objectors were able to reach a settlement for reserved rights on lands managed by the Rio Grande National Forest (Case No. 81-CW-183). This decree came about as a result of the unique physical, geologic, hydrologic, geographic, and historical facts related to water use, allocation, and supply in Water Division No. 3, and represents the basis of a stable relationship between the Forest and downstream users in the Rio Grande Basin.

Decreed Water Rights of the United States on Lands Administered by the Rio Grande National Forest

In Water Division No. 3 the United States holds reserved instream flow water rights at 303 individual Quantification Points, as well as future consumptive use of up to 203 acre-feet for administrative and operational needs consistent with forest reservation purposes. The administrative priority of these water rights is junior to all water rights filed prior to 1999. The 303 quantification points cover nearly every stream originating on the Forest, and are typically located at or near the Forest boundary. For 76 of these 303 quantification points, there are existing water rights on National Forest System lands in the same drainage; these rights are acknowledged in the decree as having no conflict with the reserved rights. The decree provides quantities of water that are sufficient to satisfy fully any need for instream flows for the following purposes:

- a. Maintaining, improving, protecting, and minimizing damage to the following:
 - (1) Riparian ecosystems, including stream-dependent wetlands;
 - (2) The natural physical function of stream channels;
 - (3) Viable and diverse populations of fish and wildlife, including all habitat necessary for such populations;
 - (4) Scenic and aesthetic conditions and values;
 - (5) Public opportunities for outdoor recreation;
 - (6) Soil conservation and preservation of the quality or soil resources;
- b. Range uses; and
- c. Prevention and control of forest fires.

Within Water Division No. 3, and as defined in the decree, the Forest Service agreed (with limited exceptions) to not injure existing water rights in the exercise of its power to grant or deny land use authorizations on National Forest System lands. Direction contained in the land management plan will be utilized under the constraints and limitations set forth within the decree issued in Case No. 81-CW-183. In addition to the reserved rights decreed in Case No. 81-CW-183, the United States currently holds water rights for about 600 springs, small reservoirs, and wells. Typical beneficial uses for these rights are stock watering, wildlife, fire suppression, domestic, fisheries, and recreation. The continued employment of these rights allows the Forest to ensure that historic usages of National Forest System lands, such as grazing, continue despite increasing demand on water resources.

Findings Required by Other Laws

I have considered the statutes governing management of the Rio Grande National Forest and find that this decision meets our obligations to the current statutory duties of the Forest Service. Following are summaries of how the revised land management plan addresses the relevant laws and executive orders.

American Indian Religious Freedom Act

No effects on American Indian, social, economic, or subsistence rights are anticipated as a result of implementing the land management plan. Regardless of which alternative is chosen, the Forest Service is required to consult with tribes when management activities may impact treaty rights or cultural sites and cultural use. Desired conditions for areas of tribal importance for all action alternatives of the land management plan are that (1) acknowledged traditional cultural properties are present for their cultural importance and are generally free of impacts from other uses, (2) access for tribal members is provided for the exercise of treaty rights and to allow opportunities to practice traditional, cultural, educational, and religious activities, and (3) traditionally used resources are managed sustainably and are available for future generations.

Archeological Resources Protection Act

This act provides protection to archaeological resources found on public lands and Indian lands of the United States. The legislation provides civil and criminal penalties for those who remove or damage archaeological resources in violation of the prohibitions contained in the act. The act prohibits the removal of archaeological resources on public lands or Indian lands without first obtaining a permit from the affected Federal manager or tribe and requires Federal agencies to develop plans to survey lands under their management to determine the nature and extent of archaeological and cultural resources.

The land management plan is strategic and programmatic in nature, providing guidance and direction to future site-specific projects and activities. Compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and 36 CFR 800 regulations requires assessments to document the presence of historic properties within the area of potential effect for any site-specific activities and also to meet the intent of this act. The Forest will also continue to consult with tribes during site-specific management activities that may

impact cultural sites and cultural use. The plan components in the land management plan include provisions that take into consideration American Indian rights and interests and cultural resources. Therefore, the land management plan is compliant with this Act.

Clean Air Act

In accordance with the Clean Air Act of 1990 and the Organic Administration Act of 1897, the Forest Service has the responsibility to protect the air, land, and water resources from the impacts of air pollutants produced within the boundaries of National Forest System lands and to work with states to protect air resources from degradation associated with the impacts of air pollution emitted outside of National Forest System lands. The LMP contains plan components to protect air quality by reducing risk of large emissions from catastrophic wildfires. Furthermore, analysis of the effects of plan implementation on air quality in the final environmental impact statement indicates that all alternatives work toward the desired conditions for air quality over the long-term to varying degrees depending on the alternative selected. Conformity determinations and more detailed air quality impact analyses will be made at subsequent levels of planning and analysis where emissions can be more accurately quantified, reasonably forecasted, and local impacts can be assessed. Therefore, the LMP is fully compliant with the Clean Air Act.

Clean Water Act

Implementing this land management plan is expected to maintain and improve water quality and satisfy all State water quality requirements. This finding is based on direction contained in the land management plan, application of “best management practices” specifically designed to protect water quality, the court ordered Division 3 Water Decree, and the discussions of water quality and beneficial uses addressed in chapter 3 of the final environmental impact statement. Management direction protecting water quality can be found in many locations throughout the land management plan, including the watershed, fish, air, and minerals sections. Project-level analysis required for land management plan implementation will also demonstrate compliance with the Clean Water Act.

Endangered Species Act

The purpose of the Endangered Species Act is to provide for the conservation of endangered species by conserving the ecosystems these species rely on. Section 7(a)(1) of the Act required Federal agencies to carry out programs for the conservation of listed species. In addition, the Endangered Species Act requires Federal agencies to ensure that any agency action does not jeopardize the continued existence of the species (Endangered Species Act, section 7(a)(2)). The Act also requires the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Forest Service to base their biological opinion and subsequent agency action, respectively, on the use of the best scientific and commercially available data 916 U.S.C. 1536(a)(2)).

A final list of proposed, threatened, endangered, and candidate species was identified by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on July 20, 2017 (USDA 2018). In accordance with Forest Service direction for listed species, a biological assessment for all federally listed and proposed aquatic and terrestrial species was completed (USDA 2018).

The biological assessment (USDA 2018) documented a no-effect determination for New Mexico meadow jumping mouse, Mexican spotted owl, yellow-billed cuckoo, bonytail chub, Colorado pikeminnow, humpback chub, and razorback sucker.

The biological assessment found that implementation of the LMP *may affect, and is likely to adversely affect*, Canada lynx. The biological assessment outlines the specific reasons for this finding.

The biological assessment found that implementation of the land management plan *may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect*, the Gunnison sage-grouse, southwestern willow flycatcher, and Uncompahgre fritillary butterfly.

The Forest received a biological opinion following Section 7 consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The Biological Opinion Regarding the Rio Grande National Forest Land Management Plan (March 15, 2019) concurred with the findings in the biological assessment.

Canada Lynx

The selected alternative uses direction in the Southern Rockies Lynx Amendment Record of Decision, as amended and modified. The Southern Rockies Lynx Amendment was completed prior to the spruce beetle infestation and accounts for live, green forested habitat. Standard VEG S7 (S-TEPC-2) and S-TEPC-3 were added to the land management plan to account for the increased amount of standing, dead spruce-fir habitat.

The direction incorporates the most recently available information from a study on the use of habitat by lynx on the Forest (Squires et al, 2018). The decision applies to lynx habitat on National Forest System lands on the Rio Grande National Forest.

Canada lynx habitat in Colorado primarily occurs in the subalpine and upper montane forest zones. Lynx show a preference of subalpine fir, Engelmann spruce, aspen, and lodgepole pine forest types. Recent information demonstrates the close relationship of lynx on the Rio Grande National Forest to particular locations within the subalpine forest zone and their use of specialized forest structure (Ivan et al. 2014, Squires et al. 2018). Other habitats used by reintroduced lynx locally include spruce-fir/aspen associations and various riparian and riparian-associated areas dominated by dense willow, particularly during the summer period (Shenk 2009).

The Rio Grande National Forest includes some of the most important lynx habitat in Colorado. About 85 percent of the 218 lynx reintroduced to Colorado during 1999-2006 were released on the Forest. Although lynx have established home ranges in other parts of the state, most lynx remain and reproduce in the high-elevation spruce-fir zone of southwestern Colorado, including the Rio Grande National Forest. Lynx continue to utilize and reproduce on the Forest. At least 6 of the 12 locations in Colorado where lynx can consistently be located occur on the Forest. Reproduction is known to have occurred in the recent past in all of these locations, highlighting the importance of certain geographic areas to the species.

The Southern Rockies Lynx Amendment identified four linkage areas on the Forest that remain important areas of habitat connectivity. Connective habitat in the San Juan

Mountains is essential for facilitating movement of Canada lynx across the landscape. The plan provides Forestwide plan components to protect connectivity.

This decision identifies the high probability lynx use areas for the Forest and clarifies that VEG S1 and VEG S2 from the Southern Rockies Lynx Amendment do not apply in lynx analysis units outside the high probability lynx use areas. Standard VEG S7 provides direction for salvage activities that occur in the high probability lynx use areas.

The biological opinion concluded that the direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of the land management plan are not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of lynx within the contiguous United State distinct population segment. Endangered species implementing regulation (50 CFR § 402.14 (i)(6)) does not require an incidental take statement for programmatic level planning. Any incidental take resulting from any action subsequently authorized, funded, or carried out under the program will be addressed in subsequent section 7 consultation, as appropriate.

Environmental Justice

Executive Order 12898 (Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations) environmental justice populations, minority and low-income populations, are present in the areas surrounding the Forest. Three of the counties in the plan area have the lowest median household income for all of Colorado. All alternatives considered in the final environmental impact statement would contribute to social and economic sustainability by providing benefits to environmental justice communities, improving the quality of life, and providing opportunities for income and jobs. The Forest would continue to provide for traditional, cultural, and spiritual values that are of particular interest to Native American tribes. No populations in the plan area would experience significant adverse human health impacts or environmental effects due to management actions proposed under any of the alternatives considered.

Federal Land Policy and Management Act

The Federal Land Policy and Management Act allows for the granting of easements across National Forest System lands. The land management plan is strategic and programmatic in nature. It provided guidance and direction to future site-specific projects and activities. The land management plan does not create, authorize, or execute any site-specific activity, although it does provide for the consideration of granting easements and rights-of-way. The land management plan is consistent with this Act.

Executive Order 13751 (Safeguarding the Nation from Impacts of Invasive Species)

Executive Order 13751, which amends Executive Order 13112, directs Federal agencies to prevent the introduction of invasive species; to detect and respond rapidly to and control populations of such species in a cost-effective and environmentally sound manner, to monitor invasive species populations accurately and reliably; to provide for restoration of native species and habitat conditions in ecosystems that have been invaded; to conduct research on invasive species and develop technologies to prevent introduction;

to provide for environmentally sound control of invasive species; and to promote public education on invasive species and the means to address them. All of these actions are subject to the availability of appropriations to support this work. Forest Service Manual 2900, Invasive Species Management, sets forth Forest Service policy, responsibilities, and direction for the prevention, detection, control, and restoration of effects from aquatic and terrestrial invasive species (including vertebrates, invertebrates, plants, and pathogens).

The land management plan is strategic and programmatic in nature, providing program-level guidance and direction for future site-specific projects and activities. The land management plan does not create, authorize, or execute any ground-disturbing activity, although it does provide for the consideration of certain types of activities that may have the potential to affect the dispersal of invasive species. The land management plan includes Forestwide desired conditions, objectives, and management approaches that stress the use of best management practices to limit the introduction of new species and limit the spread of existing populations due to management activities. Additionally, other direction provides protection of watershed, soil, riparian, and aquatic conditions in ways that will reduce management-related disturbances that might introduce new populations or increase existing ones. Land management plan monitoring also includes indicators associated with invasive species, and the effectiveness of treatments. Therefore, the land management plan is fully compliant with this Executive order.

Migratory Bird Treaty Act and Executive Order 13186

President Bill Clinton issued Executive Order 13186 (January 10, 2001), Responsibilities of Federal Agencies to Protect Migratory Birds, to further the purposes of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Acts, The Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act, the Endangered Species Act, and the National Environmental Policy Act. This order requires including the effects of Federal actions on migratory birds as a part of the environmental analysis process. On December 8, 2008, the Forest Service signed a memorandum of understanding with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to complement the Executive order (USDI-USFWS, 2008), and the Forest Service agreed to incorporate migratory bird habitat and population objectives and recommendations into the agency planning process, in cooperation with other governments, State and Federal agencies, and non-Federal partners, and strive to protect, restore, enhance, and manage the habitat of migratory birds, and prevent the further loss or degradation of remaining habitats on National Forest System lands. The Council for the Conservation of Migratory Birds was established in 2009 by the Secretary of the Interior to oversee Executive Order 13186. More than 20 Federal agencies, including the Forest Service, currently participate in and have representation on the Council for the Conservation of Migratory Birds.

Direction concerning land bird conservation in the Rocky Mountain Region is to reference the 2008 Birds of Conservation Concern list produced by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for Bird Conservation Regions when completing National Environmental Policy Act-related evaluations. Forest Service units are further encouraged to interface with the avian working groups for actions and objectives to pursue concerning migratory bird conservation. Bird Conservation Regions consist of a hierarchical framework of nested ecological units that allow for the use of multiple scale-

specific approaches to management. Bird Conservation Regions encompass areas that become progressively more ecologically similar as the units are stepped-down to a smaller scale. At the smallest and most local scale, the physiographic area is used for bird conservation efforts.

There are 37 Bird Conservation Regions in North America with four of these occurring at least partially in Colorado. The Forest occurs within the Southern Rockies Colorado Plateau Bird Conservation Region, which encompasses portions of Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and Wyoming. Information from Bird Conservation Region 16 was synthesized for use in Colorado through the development of the initial Birds of Conservation Concern list (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2008) and the Colorado Land Bird Conservation Plan. Thus at the finest scale of analysis, the Forest occurs within the Southern Rocky Mountains Physiographic Area (Area 62) of the Southern Rockies Colorado Plateau Bird Conservation Region. Seventeen of the 27 Birds of Conservation Concern for Bird Conservation Region 16 and their associated habitats occur on the Forest.

The Colorado Land Bird Conservation Plan (Beidleman 2000) identified priority species and habitats for each physiographic area in the state. Priority habitats identified for the Southern Rocky Mountains Physiographic Area include alpine tundra, aspen, cliff/rock, high-elevation riparian, lowland riparian, mixed-conifer, mountain shrubland, ponderosa pine, sagebrush shrubland, spruce-fir, and wetlands. With the exception of wetland-associated species, all priority species associated with the 11 priority habitats in Colorado occur on the Forest.

The land management plan includes Forestwide direction related to key stressors for migratory birds and their habitats, including direction to maintain forest resilience, composition, and structure and to accommodate key life history requirements of resident and migratory birds. Land management plan monitoring also includes ecosystem characteristics associated with resident and migratory bird species. Future site-specific activities and projects will comply with land management plan direction. Therefore, the land management plan is fully compliant with the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and Executive Order 13186.

Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act

The Forest Service manages National Forest System lands to sustain the multiple use of its renewable resources in perpetuity while maintaining the long-term health and productivity of the land. Resources are managed through a combination of approaches and concepts for the benefit of human communities and natural resources. As demonstrated in the final environmental impact statement and as required by the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of 1960 (16 U.S.C. 528-531), the land management plan guides sustainable and integrated management of Forest resources in the context of the broader landscape, giving due consideration to the relative values of the various resources in particular areas. Therefore, the land management plan is fully compliant with the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act.

National Environmental Policy Act

The National Environmental Policy Act required Federal agencies to prepare detailed statements on proposed actions that may significantly affect the quality of the human environment. The Act's requirement is designed to serve two major functions:

- To provide decision makers with a detailed accounting of the likely environmental effects of the proposed actions prior to adoption.
- To inform the public of, and allow comment on, such efforts.

The Forest Service has developed, gathered, and reviewed a large amount of information regarding the potential effects of each of the alternatives considered in the final environmental impact statement. The information expands and refines the data, analysis, and public input described in the analysis document associated with the draft land management plan and draft environmental impact statement (released September 2017). My decision also considers the public input, including public meetings and comments received during the 90-day comment period for the draft documents.

All substantive comments, written and oral, made on the draft environmental impact statement have been summarized and responded to in appendix D of the final environmental impact statement. As a result, changes were made to plan direction and clarifications were added to the analysis. I find that the environmental analysis and public involvement process the environmental impact statement is based on complies with each of the major elements of the requirements set forth by the Council on Environmental Quality regulations for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (40 CFR 1500-1508). This conclusion is supported by the following findings.

- The final environmental impact statement considered a broad range of reasonable alternatives. The five alternatives considered in detail in the final environmental impact statement cover a broad range of possible management allocations based on revision topics identified through public involvement and scoping.
- The selected alternative is a combination of two of the four alternatives analyzed in the final environmental impact statement and falls within the range of analysis of the final environmental impact statement. Portions of alternatives B and C are included in the selected alternative.
- Alternative B modified is the result of engagement with State and local governments, Federal agencies, and tribes, as well as robust public engagement.
- The final environmental impact statement reflects consideration of cumulative effects of implementing the alternatives by evaluating past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions in the plan area. The analysis of effects to wildlife was based on the assumption that management activities would take place with constraints to ensure habitat availability at certain thresholds. Although non-Federal lands are outside the scope of this decision, effects from their management has been considered, to the extent practicable, in the analysis.
- The final environmental impact statement makes use of the best available scientific information that is relevant to the decision being made, as discussed in detail in the section of this draft record of decision on that topic. The decision here does not

authorize any activities to occur on the Forest. Site-specific decision will be made on projects in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act, the Endangered Species Act, and other environmental laws following applicable public involvement and administrative review procedures.

National Forest Management Act

The National Forest Management Act requires the development, maintenance, amendment, and revision of land management plans for each unit of the National Forest System. These plans help create a dynamic management system, so an interdisciplinary approach to achieve integrated consideration of physical, biological, economic, and other sciences will be applied to all future actions on the unit. Under the Act, the Forest Service is to ensure coordination of the multiple uses and sustained yield of products and services of the National Forest System.

The National Forest Management Act requires the Secretary of Agriculture to promulgate regulations for developing and maintaining land management plans. On April 9, 2012, the Department of Agriculture issued a Final Planning Rule for National Forest System land management planning (36 CFR Part 219; refer to the Federal Register at 77 FR 68, pp. 21162-21276).

As discussed in detail in the requirements of the planning rule section of this document, my review of the planning process, the final environmental impact statement, and the information provided in the record of decision indicate the final plan and its preparation meet requirements for revising plans under the provisions of the 2012 Planning Rule and is fully compliant with the National Forest Management Act.

National Historic Preservation Act

Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act requires Federal agencies to take into account the effects of its actions on historic properties. This land management plan establishes a long-term management framework that does not directly authorize specific undertakings, and as such is the type of activity that does not have the potential to cause effects to historic properties. In that framework, however, specific projects and activities will be proposed, approved, and accomplished depending on site-specific conditions and circumstances. Future site-specific undertakings that are initiated under the plan will fully comply with laws and regulations. As undertakings are initiated under the plan, consultation with tribes, the State Historic Preservation Office, and other parties will occur under 36 CFR Part 800 – “Protection of Historic Properties,” or alternative processes as outlined in programmatic agreements, if available.

I find this decision is fully compliant with the National Historic Preservation Act.

Colorado Roadless Rule

The Colorado Roadless Rule (36 CFR Part 294) conserves roadless area values for future generations while providing for activities important to the citizens and economy of Colorado. Management direction for designated Colorado roadless areas is compliant with the 2012 Colorado Roadless Rule. The land management plan is a programmatic-

level planning effort and does not authorize road construction, reconstruction, or tree cutting. The Roadless Management Area simply adopts the Colorado Roadless Rule. Roadless area designation does not preclude designations of recommended wilderness or other compatible uses or designations. The land management plan is fully compliant with the Colorado Roadless Rule.

Executive Order 11989 (Use of Off-Road Vehicles on Public Land)

This executive order requires the Forest Service and other Federal land management agencies to “establish policies and provide for procedures that will ensure that the use of off-road vehicles on public lands will be controlled and directed so as to protect the resources of those lands, to promote the safety of all users of those lands, and to minimize conflicts among the various uses of those lands” (section 1). The executive order directs agencies to designate the “specific areas and trails on public lands on which the use of off-road vehicles may be permitted, and areas in which the use of off-road vehicles may not be permitted” (section 3).

The Forest has designated specific roads and trails for the use of motor vehicles (which includes off-road vehicles) that are displayed on the motorized vehicle use maps as required by 36 CFR 212 subpart B. The Forest also has completed subpart C through amendment 24 to the 1986 land management plan that is displayed in the Forest’s over-snow vehicle use map as required by 36 CFR 212 subpart C.

The Forest provides a motorized vehicle use map for wheeled motor vehicles and an over-snow vehicle use map at no charge to the public.

Conflicts between wheeled motorized and nonmotorized uses may occur. But because only 20 percent (394 of the 1,990 miles) of the Forest trails are open to wheeled motorized use (which also allows nonmotorized use), there are not many miles of trail where these uses coincide. In the winter, there are an estimated 613 mile of permitted and established trails on Forest. Of the 64 percent of the Forest designated for over-the-snow use, terrain and vegetation reduce that amount.

Prior to beginning the land management plan revision process I made a decision to delay travel management planning until after completion of the land management plan. The LMP provides an updated basis for conducting the travel management process; however, I am mindful that upon completing the travel management process in 36 CFR 212, the revised plan may need to be amended.

Executive Orders 11988 and 11990 (Floodplain Management and Protection of Wetlands)

These Executive orders require Federal agencies to avoid, to the extent possible, short- and long-term effects resulting from the occupancy and modification of floodplains and the modification or destruction of wetlands. Forestwide standards and guidelines are provided for soil, water, wetlands, and riparian areas to minimize effects to floodplains and wetlands. They incorporate the best management practices of the Forest Service policy.

Wild and Scenic Rivers Act

The National Wild and Scenic Rivers System was created by Congress in 1968 (Public Law 90-542) to preserve certain rivers with outstanding natural, cultural, and recreational values in a free-flowing condition for the enjoyment of present and future generations. The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act is notable in that it seeks to protect these rivers while at the same time acknowledging the benefits and necessity of appropriate developments within the river corridor. To be designated under the Act, a river segment must meet two fundamental requirements: the river segment must be “free-flowing” as defined by Section 16(b) of the Act, and the river segment must have one or more outstandingly remarkable values (Section 1(b)).

Rivers may be designated by Congress or, if certain requirements are met, the Secretaries of Interior or Agriculture, as appropriate. Once designated under the Act, rivers receive special management direction that ensures the maintenance of the free-flowing nature and the outstanding natural, cultural, and recreational values of the river segment. Under the Act, river segments are required to be classified as wild, scenic, or recreational:

- **Wild Rivers** – Those rivers or sections of rivers that are free of impoundments and generally inaccessible except by trail, with watersheds or shorelines essentially primitive and waters unpolluted. These represent vestiges of primitive America.
- **Scenic Rivers** – Those rivers or sections of rivers that are free of impoundments, with shorelines or watersheds still largely primitive and shorelines largely undeveloped, but accessible in places by roads.
- **Recreational Rivers** – Those rivers or sections of rivers that are readily accessible by road or railroad, that may have some development along their shorelines, and that may have undergone some impoundment or diversion in the past.

Analysis of the designated wild and scenic rivers was included in the environmental impact statement. Management area direction in the land management plan provides protection for the water quality, free-flowing conditions, and outstandingly remarkable values identified for those rivers. In addition, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act requires an evaluation of eligible wild, scenic, and recreational rivers in land management planning. This was completed, and the 118 miles of eligible and suitable rivers were identified and analyzed in the final environmental impact statement. Management direction in the land management plan provides protection of free-flowing conditions and the outstandingly remarkable values identified for the eligible segments of rivers on the Forest. Therefore, the land management plan is compliant with the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

Effective Date

The LMP becomes effective 30 calendar days after publication of the notice of its approval in the Federal Register (36 CFR 219.17(a), 2012 Planning Rule). This approval will not occur until the pre-decisional review process is complete and a final record of decision is issued.

The revised land management plan provides a framework to guide resource management. The plan is a strategic, programmatic document that does not make project-level

decisions or irreversible or irretrievable commitments of resources. Such commitments would only be made subsequent to the initiation of more detailed, site-specific proposals and further public comment opportunities as they occur, as appropriate, as part of the site-specific environmental analysis process.

Administrative Review

This decision is subject to objection as required by Federal regulations (36 CFR part 219, subpart B). The objection must be filed by way of regular mail, fax, e-mail, hand-delivery, or express delivery with the Objection Reviewing Officer: Regional Forester, USDA Forest Service Rocky Mountain Region, 1617 Cole Blvd., Building 17, Lakewood CO 80401. The fax number is 303-275-5134.

The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered objections are 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic objections must be submitted in a format such as an e-mail message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc) to R02admin-review@fs.fed.us, with “Rio Grande Land Management Plan Revision Objection” as the subject. In cases where no identifiable name is attached to an electronic message, a verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature is one way to provide verification.

Objections, including attachments, must be filed within 60 days from the publication date of this notice in *The Valley Courier* (Alamosa, Colorado), the newspaper of record. Objections or attachments received after the 60-day objection period will not be considered. The publication date in the newspaper of record is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an objection. Those wishing to object to this project should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source.

Individuals and entities who have submitted substantive formal comments related to plan revision during the opportunities for public comment (as provided in subpart A of 36 CFR Part 219) during the planning process for that decision may file an objection. Objections must be based on previously submitted substantive formal comments attributed to the objector unless the objection concerns an issue that arose after the opportunities for formal comment. All objections are open to public inspection during the objection process and must contain information as required by the 2012 Planning Rule at 36 CFR 219.54.

Additionally, we request that objection issues related to species of conservation concern be identified in the cover letter or introduction of the objection along with page numbers where the species of conservation concern-related objections can be found in the objection document. The decision to approve the species of conservation concern list will be subject to a separate objection process. The Chief of the Forest Service is the reviewing officer for species of conservation concern identification since the Regional Forester is the deciding official. Objections related to species of conservation concern will be forwarded. The Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Rio Grande National Forest Land Management Plan Revision documents the analysis and conclusions upon which this decision is based.

Plan Implementation

Existing Authorizations

All authorization of occupancy and use made prior to this decision will proceed unchanged.

The 2012 Land Management Planning Rule at 36 CFR 219.15 prescribes that project and activity consistency with the plan will be achieved through “(a) application to existing authorizations and approved projects or activities; (b) application to projects or activities authorized after the plan decision; (c) resolving inconsistency; (d) determining consistency; and (e) consistency of resource plans within the planning area with the land management plan.”

All projects and activities approved prior to the signing of this decision are not required to meet the direction of this land management plan and will remain consistent with the direction in the 1996 forest plan, as amended.

Direction in this land management plan will apply to all projects and activities that have a decision made on or after the effective date of the final record of decision. Projects and activities authorized after approval of the land management plan will be consistent with applicable plan components in the land management plan. A project or activity approval document will describe how the project or activity is consistent with the applicable plan components.

Any resource plans developed that apply to the resources or land areas within the planning area will be consistent with the plan components. Resource plans developed prior to the plan decision will be evaluated for consistency with the plan and amended if necessary.

Contact Person

For additional information concerning this draft decision or the objection process, please contact Judi Pérez at the Rio Grande National Forest Supervisor’s office at Rio Grande National Forest, 1803 W. Hwy 160, Monte Vista, CO 81144, or by phone at (719) 852-5941 or email at judi.perez@[usda.gov](mailto:judi.perez@usda.gov).

Signature and Date

DAN DALLAS

Forest Supervisor
Rio Grande National Forest

DATE